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The Contribution of Social Movement Theory to Understanding Genocide

Evidence from Rwanda

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Abstract: Recent years have witnessed a turn in the field of contentious politics toward the study of political violence, yet scholars have yet to focus their lens on genocide. Moreover, research on genocide is characterized by fundamental disagreements about its definition, origins, and dynamics, leading to a lack of generalizable theory. As a remedy, this article suggests that research on genocide can be improved by incorporating concepts from social movements. After reviewing the history of research on social movements and genocide, I analyze civilian participation in the Rwandan genocide as an example of how social movement theory helps explain civilian mobilization for genocide. Finally, I propose that a contentious politics approach to genocide would consider it one among many forms of contentious collective action, analyzable within the existing framework of social movement theory.

Keywords: contentious politics, framing, genocide, organizations, political opportunities, political process theory, Rwanda, social movement theory

Slightly over a decade ago, Colin Beck proposed that social movement theory had much to contribute to the study of terrorism. In his article, Beck argued for the analysis of terrorism as "a form of contentious politics, analyzable within the basic social movement approach of mobilizing resources, political opportunity structure, and framing" (2008: 1565). Beck identified cultural perspectives of social movement theory that address issues of identity in terrorist groups, the importance of studying networks (including recruitment and retention), research on

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radicalization and its relationship to repression and movement cycles, and the relevance of work on transnational social movements for understanding international terrorism.

Following Beck, in 2015, I made a similar argument, suggesting that social movement theory has much to contribute to understanding genocide (Luft 2015a). In particular, I argued that the same mobilization mechanisms found in other forms of contentious politics are often found in genocides, including framing and diffusion processes, while networks, I argued, can help pull people both *toward* participation in violence as well as away from it (see also Luft 2015b).

Picking up where my previous argument left off, this article combines primary fieldwork with secondary oral testimonies from participants in the Rwandan genocide as well as Human Rights Watch organization reports from the decade prior to, and during, the genocide to demonstrate how a social movement approach to genocide elucidates the processes by which previously nonviolent citizens mobilize to kill their neighbors. Specifically, the evidence demonstrates the importance of organizations and resource mobilization, framing, and political opportunity structures for mobilizing Rwandan civilians to participate in violence against their neighbors. In turn, the findings suggest that a contentious politics approach to genocide can help explain how previously nonviolent citizens mobilize to kill their neighbors.

To be sure, scholarship on violent political mobilization in social movements has recently proliferated. Often, this research focuses on variation in micro-mobilization for armed conflict (e.g., Bosi 2012; Bosi and Della Porta 2012; Viterna 2006, 2013) as well as on distinct forms of violent protest such as white supremacist movements (McVeigh 1999, 2009), religious militantism (Appleby 2000), and other violent left- and right-wing social movements (e.g., Dobratz and Waldner 2012; Klandermans and Mayer 2006; Klimke 2010). Yet prior to this new wave of scholarship, research on political violence "remained largely outside the realm of social movements research" (Steinhoff and Zwerman 2008: 214). Moreover, in 2008, Donatella Della Porta wrote that such work remained "episodic" in the social sciences (2008: 221). As a result, the years since have seen a surge of research on political violence and social movements (in addition to the above, see Bosi and Giugni 2012; Maney et al. 2012; and Oberschall 2004). Despite these developments, social movement research has said very little about genocide,[1] even though the field itself was originally developed in reaction to fascism (Nazism in particular), a political movement responsible for arguably the worst genocide of the twentieth century (Luft 2015a; Meyer 2004).

That said, genocide and social movements are not the same. Genocide is typically organized by the state against civilians, while social movements often refer to challenges from below. However, distinctions between top-down and bottom-up mobilization processes ought not to preclude research that questions what similarities and differences exist between these two kinds of mobilization. Moreover, though some might argue that social movement theory does not apply to top-down processes and only to mobilization initiated by civilians, in keeping with the literature on collective behavior and social movements more generally, I suggest there is nothing inherent to popular movements that precludes scholars from studying their dynamics when initiated by the state. Hence, Yang Su (2013) in *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements* defines "a state-sponsored social movement" as that which occurs when "collective action events are peopled by citizens in their capacity as nonstate actors, but the main source of claims, leadership, and organizational resources is from within the state itself, and state actors, in their official capacities, serve as the main organizers." He lists genocide as an example. Although I do not here consider it as a social movement per se, I do assert that theories of social movements can be useful for the study of genocide, as they have been useful for the study of other forms of violent politics, which I noted above.

Additionally, as Pamela Oliver and colleagues (2003) explain, the start of the twenty-first century was marked by protests and forms of activism that have not always been linked to pro-democratic tendencies. Recent research and current events have also demonstrated that antidemocratic movements are a recurrent feature of modern political life (e.g., Cunningham 2012; Fetner 2008; Hardisty 2000; Klandermans and Mayer 2006; McAdam and Kloos 2004; McVeigh and Estep 2019; for a useful review, see Blee 2018 and Blee and Creasap 2010). Thus, Oliver and colleagues argue: "It seems to us that one test of any theory of social movements is that we be able to use the same theory to explain processes in movements we celebrate and those we abhor, or at least to provide a genuinely theoretical account of how they differ" (2003: 236). This article presents one such attempt by applying social movement theory to the case of the Rwandan genocide and demonstrating how, indeed, the mechanisms often identified as significant for motivating progressive contentious politics can and do explain much of what occurs in normatively regressive and violent forms of collective action.

Finally, the incorporation of scholarship on political violence into the field of social movements—be it top-down or bottom-up—is central to Doug McAdam and colleagues' (1996, 2001), Sidney Tarrow's

(1989, 2011) and Charles Tilly's (2003, 2005) and Tilly and Tarrow's (2006) contentious politics paradigm of research. Goodwin adds:

> Political violence, like nonviolent resistance, civil wars, riots, and revolutions, is one form among others that contention may take. . . . The study of political violence should not become an academic specialty or subdiscipline, but should be folded in to the broader field of contentious politics. (2012: 3)

Continuing on Goodwin's line of work, one might then classify genocide as a form of categorical political violence against civilians. According to Goodwin (2006: 2031), *categorical terrorism* occurs when terrorist groups target "anonymous individuals by virtue of their belonging (or seeming to belong) to a specific ethnic or religious group, nationality, social class, or some other collectivity" with the intention of influencing several audiences. Genocide, then, can be thought of as *political violence organized by the state that targets nonstate actors because of their perceived or actual affiliation with a particular collectivity, regardless of whether they are involved in contention*. The collective bases for categorical political violence include, but are not limited to, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, and social class.

After briefly reviewing the history of research on social movements and genocide, including where they have converged and diverged in the past, this article examines 21 interviews with Rwandan genocide perpetrators collected by Scott Straus—which are published in the book *Intimate Enemy: Images and Voices of the Rwandan Genocide* (Lyons and Straus 2006)—and 9 Human Rights Watch reports in order to demonstrate similarities between research on participation in social movements and how individuals explain their participation in the Rwandan genocide. Given constraints of space and the wide array of research on social movements, this article focuses mostly on the dominant political process paradigm, which emphasizes the role of organizations and resource mobilization, framing, and political opportunity structures in mobilizing civilians with no preexisting history of violence to kill their neighbors. With data from local-level participants in the Rwandan genocide, I demonstrate how empirically observable phenomena found in social movements can also be found in mobilization processes for genocide. Further, I propose that theories of the mechanisms that mobilize individuals for contentious politics—which have long been the purview of social movement research—have much to offer for explanations of civilian participation in genocide. Subsequently, this article asserts that a social movement approach to genocide would consider it one form

of contentious politics among others, analyzable within the existing frameworks of social movement theory.

The History of Social Movement Theory and the History of Research on Genocide

When most people think of social movements, they think of leftist politics and political mobilization for progressive causes—for example, the Civil Rights movement, the Feminist movement(s), and antiwar protests.[2] Yet the field of social movements was originally developed in reaction to right-wing fascist movements and to Nazism in particular (Meyer 2004). Initial research characterized social movements as fundamentally irrational and brought on by dysfunction in society, and it argued that those who engaged in collective action did so because of anomie, deprivation, and/or contagion. What was thought of as a "spontaneous outburst" of social action was considered harmful, dangerous to society, and something only radical and irrational individuals would engage in. Such premises underpinned much research on collective behavior in the 1950s and 1960s (Blumer 1951; Kornhauser 1959; Smelser 1962; Turner and Killian 1957). "The assumption," Meyer explains, "was that social movements represented alternatives to . . . politics" (2004: 126–127). They were thus described as inherently undesirable and even dangerous to a healthy society.

Likewise, initial research on why civilians participate in genocide followed two streams: the first emphasized dysfunctional or otherwise problematic societies while the second emphasized individuals with psychopathologies or faulty socialization. Among arguments focused on the structural level, Hannah Arendt (1958) maintained that genocide is the product of totalitarianism, its external expansion, and its internal consolidation. Irving Horowitz wrote that genocide is the "operational handmaiden" of totalitarianism (1976: 36). Leo Kuper (1981) theorized that the institutionalization of power for one group in a plural society while others remain disenfranchised explains genocide, and Rudolph Rummel claimed that more authoritarianism at the state level meant a greater likelihood of genocide since, as the famous dictum goes: "Power kills; absolute power kills absolutely" (1994: 1).

Among explanations at the individual level, participants in genocide were defined as having "authoritarian personalities" characterized by an exploitative power orientation, moralistic condemnation of others, diffuse and depersonalized aggression, and a preoccupation

with toughness, to name just a few (Adorno et al. 1950). Others who argued that perpetrators had aberrant personalities include Gay Block and Malka Drucker (1992), Eva Fogelman (1994), Monroe et al. (1990), Samuel Oliner and Pearl Oliner (1998), and Nechama Tec (2003). Ronald Aronson perhaps best echoes the similarities between initial research on social movements and research on genocide in describing genocide as the product of "social madness" (1987: 136).

Since these initial forays into how and why people participate in social movements and genocide, research in both fields has turned to the relationship between mobilization and democracy. Again, as David Meyer (2004) explains, protest movements of the 1960s thrived in advanced industrial societies, a fact that forced scholars to question their assumptions about the relationship between social and individual dysfunction and mass mobilization. Not only were activists in both the United States and the United Kingdom found to be psychologically well-adjusted (Keniston 1968) and more civically engaged than their nonactive counterparts (Parkin 1968), researchers argued that because activism occasionally led to progressive government concessions, protest could be seen as a *rational* decision made by individuals who were otherwise disenfranchised and unable to make claims using conventional methods (Piven and Cloward 1977). Protest came to be seen as a "political resource" necessary for democratic politics (McCarthy and Zald 1977), rather than irrational behavior resulting from widespread anomie and individual deviance.

Genocide, too, has come to be seen as an activity of "ordinary people" that may occur even in democratic societies. Perhaps most famously articulated by Arendt (1976), Zygmunt Bauman (1989), and Christopher Browning (1998), the central argument is that an individual need not be sadistic or have a particularly authoritarian personality type but, rather, various social norms and group pressures that exist in times of normalcy can motivate individuals to join in mass violence. Stanley Milgram (1974), for example, famously demonstrated that social norms of obedience to authority could compel average civilians to commit cruelties against their peers. Others who have argued for the role of elite orders and social pressures in motivating people to kill include Bauman (1989), Philip Gourevitch (1998), Raul Hilberg (1992), Herbert Kelman and V. Lee Hamilton (1989), Shaharyar Khan (2001), and Christian Scherrer (2002). Far from a mark of deviance or abnormality, genocidal actions are explained in this theoretical perspective as outcomes of institutionalized norms and everyday forms of interaction.

Likewise, in tandem with developments in social movement research, theories of genocide have shifted to focus on the relationship between genocide and modernity, especially processes of democratization. Michael Mann (2005), for example, writes that "mass ethnic cleansing" is "the dark side of democracy." He proposes eight theses, but the central argument in his 2005 work is that when *demos* and *ethnos* become entwined—that is to say, when ethnic, as opposed to civic, conceptualizations of the nation predominate—the ideal of the nation-state encourages the cleansing of minorities. Likewise, Andreas Wimmer asserts that modernity rests on democracy, citizenship, and national self-determination, or what he calls "the indivisible trinity of the world order" (2002: 3). The achievement of this trinity is impossible without some kind of forced expulsion, assimilation, or extermination—that is to say, genocide. Others who argue that liberal concepts of democracy, including those around race, ethnicity, and nation, are necessary for the occurrence of genocide include Mark Levene (2005), Jacques Sémelin (2007), and Eric Weitz (2003).

From the mid-1980s to the late 1990s, the political process approach to social movements characterized by a focus on resource mobilization, framing, and political opportunity structures came to dominate the literature in the field (Beck 2008). This approach stems largely from a shift in *why* social movements occur to *how*. Unfortunately, genocide research has yet to crystallize around a framework of theoretical perspectives in the same way. As Erik Schneiderhan (2013) notes, even recent turns from teleological theories of genocide to more pragmatic, process-focused approaches insufficiently specify the theoretical frameworks guiding their analysis. The problem of how to think about and situate genocide is also evident in ongoing theoretical debates on what, exactly, constitutes genocide for purposes of social scientific analysis (Straus 2012; Verdeja 2012). The contentious politics framework, especially key concepts from research on social movements, can therefore provide useful tools for understanding human behavior in situations of extreme state violence. When it comes to theorizing participation in genocide, four mechanisms currently receive the majority of scholarly attention: obedience to authority (or instrumentalization), intergroup antagonism, within-group pressures, and dehumanization (for a review of these approaches, see Luft 2015b). Some researchers also note how it is possible, and in fact common, for multiple mechanisms and motivations to function simultaneously during a genocide (Browning 1998; Finkel and Straus 2012; Hinton 2004; McBride 2016; Straus 2006) and

also for people to shift stances from participation to resistance or rescuing behaviors and back again (Luft 2015b).

Perhaps, then, as a result of this diversity in mechanisms identified at the micro-level of participation, studies of what motivates civilians to kill in genocide lack a unifying theoretical framework. It is here where basic approaches and concepts from social movements can help. Specifically, theories of contention can offer guidelines for how to think about the processes that draw previously nonviolent civilians into violent actions against their neighbors. Thus, in what follows, I demonstrate the potential for social movement studies to shed light on civilian mobilization for genocide using observational field notes, oral testimonies with Rwandans who participated in the 1994 genocide, and Human Rights Watch organizational reports. The results specify how resources, framing, and political opportunity structures mattered for mobilizing previously nonviolent civilians to kill their neighbors. In the conclusion, I suggest that it is time for social movement studies and genocide studies to converge once again.

Data and Methods

The heart of this analysis is the full set of transcribed interviews contained in *Intimate Enemy: Images and Voices of the Rwandan Genocide* by Robert Lyons and Scott Straus (2006). Though but a small sample of the total percentage of civilians who participated in the genocide,[3] these Rwandans are representative of the kinds of local-level killers that mobilized for violence against their neighbors in 1994: "farmers, fishermen, and carpenters from all around Rwanda who made the genocide possible" (Lyons and Straus 2006: 17). Still, this small sample size cannot be considered statistically representative. Consequently, I treat this data as a set of 21 cases that provide insights on civilian mobilization for genocide that ought to be extended with future work (Small 2009). The goal is to identify mechanisms for violent mobilization that are similar to those found in research on contentious politics and suggest opportunities for future research based on these findings.

That said, to ascertain validity and reliability as best as possible given the difficult nature of the data (discussed further below), I triangulated these transcripts with the entirety of reports from Human Rights Watch concerning violence in Rwanda from 1990 to 1999 ($n = 9$) as well as my own field notes from research in Rwanda in the summer of 2009. All interviews and organizational reports were coded using *NVivo*

qualitative analysis software and the abductive analysis method, thus allowing themes and patterns from past work on social movements to inform the coding while also attending to how the data diverged from this work and its findings (Tavory and Timmermans 2014).

Last but not least, concerning the challenges of working with participants in political violence, it is worth stating outright that studying genocide is tricky business. Unfortunately, because of the dangerous context in which it occurs (genocide nearly always happens during war), it is relatively difficult to research civilian participation in genocide. As a result, few studies have been able to use real-time participant observation or interviews as methods for understanding what motivates civilians to kill.[4] That the data is retrospective therefore presents several dilemmas. Civilians who kill in genocide might downplay their participation in order to mitigate their responsibility or demonstrate contrition to interviewers or imaginary readers. They may also alter their stories for fear of reprisal by family, friends, or the state. Though the participants whose accounts I consider here had already admitted their guilt and been sentenced for their crimes at the time of the interview, it is also possible that their time in prison shaped their recollections of the genocide, as conversations with other participants might have altered their memories (Fujii 2010). Finally, since 1996, the Rwandan government has instituted a Demobilization and Reintegration Program also known as *Ingando* that seeks to "reeducate" participants in the genocide, and this program is highly controversial (Mgbako 2005; Thomson 2009, 2011).[5] It is likely that the respondents whose testimonies are considered here experienced this program and that this shaped their interpretations of the violence as well. To mitigate the consequences of these various and complex issues, I triangulate Lyons and Straus's raw transcripts with Human Rights Watch organizational reports and my own fieldwork notes from Rwanda in 2009 to assess the validity and reliability of each claim. Below, I present the results of my analysis.

Theories of Contention and Mobilizing for Genocide

Resource Mobilization

Resource Mobilization Theory (hereafter, RMT) stems from the "public goods problem" most significantly interpreted by Mancur Olson (1965). As mentioned above, past social movement scholars argued that individuals mobilized for protest due to common interests and various kinds of dissatisfaction. However, Olson argued, if everyone had the

same interests, then it would simply be easier and safer to be a "free rider" than to be a protestor. In considering the "free rider problem," RMT, drawing on Olson, argued by logic that all collective action was individually irrational. People would not become involved unless they were coerced or provided with direct rewards for joining. Recognizing that interests do not directly translate into action was an important corrective to past research, but the question then became "what *does* motivate such action?" Scholars working with RMT argue that mobilization for social movements is directly tied to the presence of available resources and organizations that can help foster mobilization and, in fact, help make the decision to participate in collective action a rational one when benefits outweigh costs. Consequently, what predicts whether actors will mobilize is whether movement entrepreneurs can mobilize group resources via organizations to the extent that individual participation is rational (McCarthy and Zald 1973, 1977).

In the classic formulation of RMT, social-organizational resources are central to the mobilization process. As a result, most work studied how organizations helped generate the mobilization of money and labor, resources that would otherwise remain individual (Klandermans 1997; Klandermans and Oegema 1987).[6] However, in a recent formulation, Bob Edwards and John McCarthy (2004) synthesized past work to create a fivefold typology of resource forms: moral, cultural, social-organizational, human, and material. They emphasize that the various forms of resources are divided unequally among social groups. Thus, resources can come from within a group or from outside of it, and there are myriad kinds of resources, all of which vary historically (i.e., media and technology) and socially (groups with affluent members might have more access to material resources, whereas groups of the working class might have more access to human capital).

Like a social movement, genocide rarely occurs as the result of a spontaneous outburst. A majority of the population does not suddenly and unbidden take up arms against its neighbors. Instead, organizations help mobilize civilians and provide guidance, legitimacy, and benefits to participation. The case of Rwanda is illustrative: in the 1994 genocide, violence rarely began with civilians killing on their own. Rather, Hutu were first directed to attack Tutsi in local meetings organized by extremist political authorities.[7] Further, these meetings had a historical precedent: in Rwanda prior to the 1994 genocide, each cell had an organized committee in which five elected representatives managed under a leader. Cell committees were in charge of organizing communal work (*umuganda*) and, when necessary, mob attacks used to organize group

responses to danger (*igitero*) (Mironko 2004).[8] During the 1994 genocide, leaders in these meetings would tell Hutu to kill Tutsi, and leaders would occasionally commit acts of violence themselves. Through such actions, they verbally and visually indicated that systematic murder of Tutsi was how the conflict would proceed. Des Forges (1999: 6–8) explains:

> The genocide was not a killing machine that rolled inexorably forward. . . . Orders from the prime minister were handed down to the prefect, who passed them on to the burgomasters, who called local meetings throughout the communes where they read the instructions to the population. . . . By appropriating the well-established hierarchies of the military, administrative and political systems, leaders of the genocide were able to exterminate Tutsi with astonishing speed and thoroughness.

Likewise, Jerome, a farmer from Kibuye who killed four Tutsi during the genocide, describes the first meeting in his sector, where leaders separated the population and started killing:

> Before the president's death, we had no problems. . . . The killings reached our sector because of a businessman, in collaboration with the burgomaster. They were the ones who created divisions in the population. They held a meeting to separate people. They said that the country was being taken over by the Tutsis and that the Hutus were finished. They said that we had to defend ourselves. There were Tutsis who worked in the hospital and a Tutsi pastor. After this meeting, the businessmen and the burgomaster told people to go and hunt these Tutsis.

Along with Des Forges's description, Jerome's testimony shows how genocide was instigated and supported by Rwandan authorities in organized meetings that facilitated transmission of the call to arms. These leaders not only encouraged violence but they also lowered the costs of participation by publicly endorsing a hardliner stance. They also *raised* the costs of *nonparticipation* by drawing on the social-historical and cultural significance of organized meetings to mobilize civilians for violence. In addition to providing a setting by which ordinary Rwandans learned what was expected of them in the new social context of war, organized meetings were a resource infused with historical legitimacy, one that was used by extremists to mobilize civilians for violence.

By contrast, where local Rwandan committees resisted violence and organizational state structures resisted co-optation by extremists,

violence did not occur (see, for example, the case of Giti in Bangwanubusa 2009 and Straus 2006). Without the legitimacy provided by state actors and institutions, as well as the coordination and communication mechanisms provided by the state as an organization, it is unlikely that genocide would have happened. Organized meetings were critical for accumulating diverse forms of resources and mobilizing civilians to participate in the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

Framing

The key idea on how framing matters for social movements is that meanings do not emerge automatically out of preexisting structural arrangements, unanticipated events, or long-held ideologies (Benford and Snow 2000). Rather, while resource mobilization theorists assumed that people held shared grievances and would act on them if the benefits outweighed the costs, framing theorists argued that, actually, the process of getting people to collectively align with a particular diagnosis, prognosis, and call to action[9] requires successful framing work by movement entrepreneurs (Benford and Snow 2000; Gamson 1975, 1992; Snow et al. 1986). Ivan Ermakoff (2010: 545) explains further, "unexpected events do not produce their own interpretations. They call for them." Thus there are multiple ways of looking at the same situation, and the process of creating frames that people draw on to make sense of unfolding events is active, complex, interactional, and negotiated. Frames are not aggregates of individual attitudes and perceptions, but the outcome of negotiating shared meanings (Gamson 1992).[10] Additionally, because developing, generating, and elaborating frames are contested processes, activists cannot simply impose any frame and expect it to succeed. Rather, there are a variety of challenges confronting those who engage in movement framing, including counterframing efforts (Benford and Hunt 1994) and framing contests (Ryan 1991).

In the 1994 Rwandan genocide, framing processes were critical to the shaping of how civilians throughout the country made sense of initial violence in the capital, Kigali, and especially President Habyarimana's assassination,[11] which was articulated by extremists organizing the genocide as a motive for violence. Those first killed in Rwanda were opponents of the Mouvement Républicain National pour la Démocratie et le Développement (MRND) political party to which extremists belonged, Hutu and Tutsi alike. The initial targets included politicians opposed to the presidential majority as well as those who encouraged adherence to the Arusha Accords.[12] Human rights activists and civil society leaders

were also among the first attacked on the basis of the assumption that they, like the others, would encourage and accept negotiations with the Rwandan Patriotic Front—a rebel group of Tutsi refugees that threatened the state by launching a civil war from Uganda in 1990 (Reyntjens 1994). This targeting of moderates who might have mitigated extremists' calls for violence through the promotion of a different frame is indicative of how genocide organizers, like social movement leaders, develop and deploy frames to achieve a specific purpose. They simultaneously seek to limit the promotion of oppositional frames that might impede their aims.

Furthermore, evidence indicates that extremists' attempts to promote this frame of Tutsi responsibility for President Habyarimana's assassination succeeded. Of 21 perpetrators interviewed by Straus, 81 percent noted the significance of Habyarimana's death for the start of violence in their sectors. However, Habyarimana's assassination did not lead to killings outright. In fact, testimony from perpetrators shows how it was extremists' *interpretations* of the death and their communication of its significance to civilians that spurred violence. Important leaders at the local level in Rwanda articulated the crisis in racial frames—they blamed all Tutsi for the President's death and described Tutsi as inherently threatening to Hutu—and this stimulated respondents to begin thinking about their circumstances in a racialized manner.[13]

Consider Alphonse, responsible for killing one person during the genocide and leading one attack, who recalls: "At the beginning, everyone was afraid. We didn't know who was to be killed and who was not to be killed. We heard gunshots in the city, which made us afraid. Tutsis and Hutus hid together." Prior to the genocide, Alphonse had a Tutsi wife and mother. Similarly, François explains how, four days after the death of the president, "[we] joined Tutsis and fought people from other regions that had attacked the area: we were together, sharing life and death." François killed two Tutsi during the genocide and led one attack. He explains how "what changed was the death of Habyarimana. When the attacks came back, they said: 'The Tutsis are bad. They killed the president.' And that is when we killed them because they had killed the head of state." In both these interviews, perpetrators describe initial peace and sometimes even coordinated Hutu and Tutsi attempts to ward off potential threats to their shared communities. What changed their *alignment* from *with* to *against* Tutsis was the use of a racial frame by those in power to articulate the crisis of the President's assassination: the leaders depicted the murder as indicative of a Tutsi threat.

Importantly, arguing that framing mattered for shaping how Rwandans understood the conflict around them is not the same as arguing

that civilians mobilized for genocide because they *believed* the frame. Rather, as I explain elsewhere (Luft 2015b), Hutu participated in the genocide for numerous and complex reasons, including in-group social pressures, direct coercion by authorities, a lack of access to financial resources that might otherwise have enabled them to resist, and challenging negotiations whereby people sometimes engaged in violence as a strategy to save others with whom they were close. Occasionally, these same people defected from participating in the genocide as well, suggesting that the frame shaped people's decision-making about violence, not that it *caused* them to align with extremists only.

Simultaneously, the argument about framing *also* does not negate the fact that some civilians aligned with the racist frames of hardliners due to ideological collusion, in which people align with movements because their beliefs match those of the mobilizers (Ermakoff 2008). Nor does it negate participation as a result of ideological transformation, which occurs when individuals reconstruct their meaning systems, usually in the context of intense socialization and heightened emotionality (Oliver and Johnston 2000). Thinking about framing as separate from ideology, particularly in the context of genocide, allows us to meaningfully theorize the different reasons why people mobilize for violence without assuming that the frame itself is equivalent to participants' beliefs. As a result, the statements from participants in the Rwandan genocide introduce an important addendum to common understandings of why civilians kill: for many ordinary Rwandans, extremists' framing shaped the lens through which they perceived the President's assassination and the conflict unfolding around them. In turn, attention to framing allows researchers to meaningfully theorize mobilization for genocide without treating extremists' discourse as equivalent to civilians' motivations for participating.

This finding combines diverse micro-level theories of the Rwandan genocide with a general framework from social movement research into a common theoretical mechanism. Though it is often treated as a given that the categories of a genocide are very significant categories in civilians' lives before the conflict, these perpetrators' testimonies indicate that, for some, their racial identities had once been much less consequential.[14] In other words, racial identification in and of itself was not *causal* for Rwanda's genocide once President Habyarimana was assassinated, as many scholars have argued (i.e., Gourevitch 1998; Mamdani 2001; Melvern 2004; Prunier 1995; White 2009). Rather, it is what was done with racial categories in a highly violent context that mattered (Fujii 2009; Luft 2015b; Straus 2006). Considering the

literature on framing from social movements therefore allows scholars to meaningfully theorize the possibility that relationships between Hutu and Tutsi were ruptured by the framing efforts of political entrepreneurs—in this case genocidal extremists, bent on mobilizing Hutu civilians to kill their Tutsi neighbors—while simultaneously allowing for the possibility that civilians' motivations for aligning with the frame were diverse.

Political Opportunity Structures

In addition to mobilizing resources, as well as the importance of framing, the third concept in the now-classic tripartite social movement framework is the idea of political opportunity structures (hereafter, PS). Initially developed by Peter Eisinger (1973) and then expanded upon by Tilly (1978), the central point of PS is that exogenous factors can facilitate or constrain prospects for mobilization (Meyer and Minkoff 2004). As a result, PS emphasize that framing processes are affected by the sociocultural and political contexts in which they are embedded, so framing and PS are interactively linked.

Furthermore, PS also shape activists' decision-making processes about when to mobilize, not just *how*, and so here too interactions between resource mobilization and external politics matter. For example, scholars have argued that increased access to state structures (McAdam 1982; Tarrow 1989), the nature of political cleavages (including divisions within the elite) (Tarrow 1989), state capacity and strength (high or low) (Amenta et al. 1994; Kitschelt 1986; Kriesi et al. 1995), alliance structures (Tarrow 1989), perceived threat (Einwohner 2003; Goldstone and Useem 1999; Goodwin 2001; Loveman 1998; Rasler 1996),[15] and more inform the likelihood of a movement's success and the repertoires of contention that a movement draws upon.

Predictably, given the wide array of work on PS and ideas about what constitutes an opportunity structure, as well as the lack of testing alongside negative cases—what Traci Sawyers and David Meyer (1999) call "missed opportunities" for social movement mobilization—some scholars have warned that the PS concept is "in danger of becoming a sponge that soaks up every aspect of the social movement environment" (Gamson and Meyer 1996: 275). Still, the central thesis that movements are shaped by their wider political environments is important not just for understandings of what facilitates social movement mobilization but also for understandings of what facilitates genocide. Extremists' abilities to mobilize civilians for genocide heavily depend on events in the wider

political environment that provide openings for contentious actions that might not have existed beforehand. At the macro-level, research suggests that war is necessary for genocide to take place. In fact, Straus writes: "The empirical connection between genocide and war is arguably the most robust empirical finding in the most recent literature and genocides generally occur in wartime or in response to the threat of armed conflict" (2012: 546). Citing scholars such as Manus Midlarsky (2005), Jacques Sémelin (2007), Martin Shaw (2003), his own work (Straus 2006), and Benjamin Valentino and colleagues (2004), Straus details three causal mechanisms by which war leads to or facilitates genocide. First, war creates threat (perceived or real) and insecurity. This increases the probability that violence will be deployed to counter the threat. Second, war raises the likelihood that opponents will be classified as enemies targeted for destruction. Third, "war instigates the use of militarized forms of power (militaries, weaponry, and so forth)" (Straus 2012: 547). This, too, raises the probability of deploying lethal violence against perceived enemies. In short, "wars favor violence" (2012: 547). War can be seen as a political opportunity for extremists interested in mobilizing civilians for genocide. At both the macro- and micro-levels, this is evident in data from Rwanda.

President Habyarimana's assassination was interpreted as a crisis for Rwandan civilians.[16] Here again, it is worth recalling Ermakoff's (2008, 2010) argument that unexpected events are characterized by high levels of uncertainty. In such situations, individuals often desperately seek to reorient themselves. One mechanism for doing so is by looking to the behavioral stances adopted by prominent actors in a public setting (Ermakoff 2008).[17] In Rwanda, MRND extremists became those prominent actors through the opportunity created by the assassination. For hardliners who sought to take control of the state and oust both current and future political opposition, the sudden vacuum after Habyarimana's death provided an opportunity to take control of state machinery and set in motion the wheels of genocide.[18]

At the micro-level, the political opportunity provided by Habyarimana's assassination translated into individual behaviors in two ways. First, as discussed above, it allowed MRND extremists to make claims about the Tutsi threat given the context of the president's death. Hardliners used official institutional channels to disseminate this idea of threat, especially through local organizations with a history of mobilizing civilians for social action. Second, the crisis of insecurity *also* made it more likely that civilians would believe hardliners' framing, whereas they might not have listened to these explanations in times of peace and

normalcy. Consider, for example, Thierry's account of why he participated in the genocide:

> Before [the war], I had heard the history of the Tutsis, but I was never interested. With the 1990 war, I began to think about it, but not really. But with Habyarimana's death, I became interested. . . . I learned that Habyarimana was shot at 8:00 am. That morning, everyone you saw said: 'We have been saying . . . for a long time that the Tutsis will exterminate us and, *voila*, they just killed Habyarimana, who was protected. You, the simple peasants, you are finished.

Thierry killed one Tutsi during the genocide and led several attacks. He had a Tutsi wife and claims that, prior to the genocide, he did not know how to differentiate between Hutu and Tutsi. His testimony demonstrates how the political opportunity provided by Habyarimana's death opened the possibility for genocidal entrepreneurs to propagate a frame that Tutsi were evil and threatening and that they had to be eliminated. Furthermore, the acute crisis and uncertainty created by the event also increased the likelihood that some Rwandans would believe this particular frame, while others would align with it for the reasons discussed above. This interpretation follows research on PS that finds that frames that were not necessarily plausible in the past can become credible in times of uncertainty, partly because the crisis generated by disruption introduces the possibility of novelty (Ermakoff 2010). Likewise, in times of uncertainty, people can act in ways they might not have otherwise, especially when uncertainty is coterminous with the threat of violence.

In sum, paying attention to the role of PS in genocides highlights the primacy of context in facilitating mobilization by extremists seeking to enact genocidal violence and by followers reacting to unfolding dynamics. The social movement concept of PS furthers the possibility for scholarship on genocide to systematically theorize the contingent and processual nature of genocide, especially the role of external events in facilitating mobilization.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article argues that social movement research, especially in the field of contentious politics, holds relevant insights for studies of genocide and how civilians become mobilized to kill other civilians. Analysis of interviews with 21 civilian perpetrators in Rwanda combined with insights from secondary sources finds that resource mobilization and

organizations, framing processes, and political opportunity structures, are all critical to drawing civilians into genocidal participation. One suggestion, then, is to incorporate research on genocide with research on contentious politics to advance theoretical knowledge of how and why civilians mobilize for genocide.

In Rwanda, MRND extremists put forth behavioral repertoires at local meetings with a history of state-endorsed mobilization for community labor and politics. They captured state institutions infused with a historical and cultural precedent for coordination and mobilization and used them to articulate repertoires of violence to civilians deciding how to act in the context of uncertainty and war. Like social movements, genocides have costs and require resources, planning, communication, and the establishment of sanctioned behaviors. A core argument for what compels people to act in social movements focuses on the role of organizations in mobilizing individuals and diffusing behavioral repertoires. Mobilizing civilians for genocide proves no different: in Rwanda, by capturing the state and utilizing local organizations, institutions, and authorities, MRND extremists showed civilians how to "proceed." Local meetings enforced political articulations and directed civilians' actions. Importantly, in locations where these meetings did not take place, *there was no genocide*.

Additionally, after President Habyarimana's assassination, Hutu Rwandan civilians did not erupt in spontaneous mass violence against their neighbors. Many did not even know who to blame for the president's death, and some organized locally with Tutsi peers against possible outside attackers. Movement activists—MRND extremists bent on eliminating the Tutsi population—had to actively shape local understandings of Habyarimana's assassination. They adopted a racial frame that situated Tutsi and Hutu in direct opposition, blaming Tutsi for the assassination and calling on Hutu to publicly align against them to protect the country. Research on framing processes argues that the intentional activity of movement entrepreneurs to construct reality is an important aspect of social movement mobilization. The data herein demonstrate the role of conscious racial framing for reshaping social divisions in the Rwandan genocide. Finally, in Rwanda, the event of the assassination provided a political opportunity for extremists to capture state institutions and use them to disseminate the frame of the Tutsi threat and repertoires of violence against them. The crisis generated by the assassination also mattered because it made the hardliner frame of a Tutsi threat plausible. Scholarship on political opportunity structures argues that exogenous factors are often critical for the emergence of

social movements and for enhancing prospects of mobilization. Here, too, social movement research elucidates the process by which genocides unfold.

To conclude, this article does not argue that genocide is a social movement *per se*. However, that genocidal behavior is exemplary of more general social processes stands in contrast to long-abandoned theories of perpetrators as inherently evil, dysfunctional, or irrational, and it explains how ordinary civilians come to participate in extraordinary crimes—ideas both once at the heart of work on social movements. Empirically observable phenomena such as mobilizing resources and organizations, framing, and political opportunity structures, all normally associated with social movements and other forms of contentious politics, can be used to make sense of mobilizing processes in contexts in which civilians participate in mass state violence. Now, it is time to bring social scientific studies of genocide up to speed with social movements and contentious politics research.

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Notes

1. Exceptions include Rachel Einwohner (2003, 2006); Rachel Einwohner and Thomas Maher (2011); Maher (2010), and Michaela Soyer (2014). Each of these authors focuses on mobilization from below—in the case of the Holocaust, of Jews against Nazis—rather than the top-down mobilization process of genocide that is the focus of this article. As a result, perhaps the account that most closely resembles the study of genocide from a top-down social movements perspective is Yang Su's (2011) study of collective killing in rural China during the cultural revolution. In analyzing the violence in Guangxi and Guangdong provinces, he draws on concepts such as identity formation, resource mobilization, political opportunity structures, and framing. However, Su specifies that although his case shares basic premises with genocide and mass killing, he considers it to be a phenomenon of a different kind. As a result, I likewise classify his study as being about violent collective action but not about genocide.
2. A fuller, more comprehensive review of the history of research on genocide can be found in Luft (2015a).
3. Straus (2004) estimates that between approximately 175,000 and 210,000 Hutu Rwandans participated in the Rwandan genocide, amounting to between 7 percent and 8 percent of the active adult Hutu population in 1994. This estimate does not distinguish between civilian and military or militia participants, but we can assume based on these statistics that the total number of civilian participants in the genocide was lower than this number, which includes every category of participant in the violence.
4. The rare and remarkable exception is Alison des Forges's *Leave None To Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (1999), published by Human Rights Watch. Des Forges was in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide, and her observations have proved indispensable for scholars ever since.
5. A full review of the Rwandan Demobilization and Reintegration Program is beyond the scope of this article; however, scholars such as Mgbako (2005) and Thomson (2009, 2011) have written excellent analyses. I am also unable to include my own interviews with Rwandans from fieldwork in 2009 because of this program: during my time in Rwanda, my ability to interview Rwandans who participated in the genocide was highly controlled and monitored by the government, and those I was able to speak with had recently returned (sometimes forcibly) from Democratic Republic of Congo only months or sometimes weeks earlier. These respondents' unique situations precluded formal study participation under institutional review board standards; consequently, their accounts simply helped inform my reading of secondary data.
6. The argument that organizations are critical for facilitating participation has been heavily criticized by Piven and Cloward (1977), who argue that poor people's movements derive their gains from mass defiance, so building permanent organizations is inherently counterproductive to their aims. Likewise, Piven and Cloward (1992) claim that RMT blurs the distinction between normative and non-normative forms of collective action.

7. The nouns "Hutu" and "Tutsi" are typically used in the same form in the singular and the plural. I therefore maintain this practice throughout this paper unless directly quoting a source that does otherwise.
8. Des Forges suggests also that the Rwandan government had often mobilized the population for past campaigns such as those to end illiteracy, to vaccinate children, and to improve the status of women. She writes that the Rwandan government "had executed these efforts through the existing administrative and political hierarchies, requiring agents to go beyond their usual duties for a limited period of time for some major goal of national importance. The organizers of genocide similarly exploited the structures that already existed . . . and called upon personnel to execute a campaign to kill Tutsi and Hutu presumed to oppose Hutu power" (1999: 317).
9. What is otherwise known as diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and motivational framing (Snow and Benford 1988).
10. The idea of framing is derived from Erving Goffman's *Frame Analysis* (1974)—to frame something is to assign meaning to situations and events.
11. Hutu Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana was president of Rwanda from 1973 to 1994. He was killed on 6 April 1994, when his airplane was shot down near Kigali Airport.
12. The Arusha Accords consisted of a power-sharing deal brokered by the United Nations in August 1993 to end the civil war between the Government of Rwanda and the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF).
13. Note: I intentionally use the term "race" when describing Hutu/Tutsi categories during the 1994 genocide because in Rwanda, during the genocide, "Hutu" and "Tutsi" were defined as racial categories according to the Rwandan government. For more on Rwanda's ethnoracial categories, past and present, see Luft and Thomson (forthcoming).
14. For a much more detailed analysis of the significance of race for genocide in Rwanda and the relationship between racial categories and behavioral categories of perpetrator, victim, bystander, and rescuer in the 1994 genocide, see Luft (2015b).
15. Though the concept of "opportunity" in PS can seem to imply the opening of state structures and other exogenous factors that facilitate mobilization, a significant body of work argues that, in fact, increasing repression and the closing of political access can be thought of as a political opportunity as well. These scholars find that perceptions of threat triggered by repression frequently lead contenders to mobilize defensively (Almeida 2003, 2008; Einwohner and Maher 2011; Gamson and Meyer 1996; Maher 2010; McVeigh 1999, 2009; O'Hearn 2009; Soyer 2014; Tilly 1978; Van Dyke and Soule 2002). By contrast, some scholars argue that threat and opportunity are distinct concepts. In particular, Jack Goldstone and Charles Tilly (2001) deconstruct threat into two kinds: harms currently experienced and anticipated, or current threat, and repressive threat, which is characterized by perceived costs of inaction. They argue that mobilization is more likely to occur when threats are perceived as current and lethal.

16. Schneiderhan (2013) makes a similar argument about President Habyarimana's assassination, but his analysis of how this moment of acute insecurity led to genocide differs from the one presented here.
17. According to Ermakoff (2008), there are three ways in which members of a group facing the same decision align their behaviors with one another: alignment can be sequential, through the observation of stances that others within one's reference group are taking; local, through private conversations with similar others; or tacit, through inference-making processes drawn by observing the stances taken by prominent actors. Each of these was present during the Rwandan genocide, as civilians sought to make sense of events unfolding around them, but time and again tacit coordination emerges as the most significant process for eventual perpetrators' understandings of the conflict as one between Hutu and Tutsi, with Tutsi being responsible for the assassination of Habyarimana.
18. To this day, responsibility for President Habyarimana's assassination remains unclear. According to latest data, responsibility lies with the RPF and current Rwandan President Paul Kagame (for a summary, see www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-new-information-supports-claims-kagame-forces-were-involved-in/). According to President Kagame, however, the president's plane was shot down by Hutu extremists who were a part of his inner circle and who intended to eliminate and intimidate moderates in the government, including the president himself (Lemarchand 2018).

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